

Ayah Usamah bin Laden

His father Mohammed Awad bin Laden came to the kingdom from Hadramout (South Yemen) sometime around 1930. The father started his life as a very poor laborer (porter in Jeddah port), to end up as owner of the biggest construction company in the kingdom. During the reign of King Saud, bin Laden the father became very close to the royal family when he took the risk of building King Saud's palaces much cheaper than the cheapest bid. He impressed King Saud with his performance but he also built good relations with other members of the royal family, especially Faisal.

During the Saud-Faisal conflict in the early sixties, bin Laden the father had a big role in convincing King Saud to step down in favor of Faisal. After Saud's departure the treasury was empty and bin Laden was so supportive to King Faisal that he literally paid the civil servants' wages of the whole kingdom for six months. King Faisal then issued a decree that all construction projects should go to bin Laden. Indeed, he was appointed for a period as the minister of public works.

In 1969 the father took the task of rebuilding Al-Aqsa mosque after the fire incident. Interestingly the bin Laden family say that they have the credit of building all the three mosques, because later on their company took over the task of major extension in Mecca and Medina mosques.

The father was fairly devoted Moslem, very humble and generous. He was so proud of the bag he used when he was a porter that he kept it as a trophy in the main reception room in his palace. The father used to insist on his sons to go and manage some projects themselves.

The father had very dominating personality. He insisted to keep all his children in one premises. He had a tough discipline and observed all the children with strict religious and social code. He maintained a special daily program and obliged his children to follow. At the same time the father was entertaining with trips to the sea and desert. He dealt with his children as big men and demanded them to show confidence at young age. He was very keen not to show any difference in the treatment of his children.

Osama was exposed very early on his age to this experience but he lost his father when he was 13. He married at the age of 17 to a Syrian girl who was a relative. He grew up as religiously committed boy and the early marriage was another factor of protecting him from corruption.

Osama had his primary, secondary and even university education in Jeddah. He had a degree in public administration 1981 from King Abdul-Aziz university in Jeddah. Countries of the Arabian Peninsula, Syria, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Sudan are the only countries he has been to. All stories of trips to Switzerland, Philippines, and London are all unfounded.

STRUCTURING HIS MENTALITY

In addition to the general Islamic commitment he started forming an Islamic responsibility at early age. His father used to host hundreds of pilgrims during Hajj season from all over the world. Some of those were senior Islamic scholars or leaders of Muslim movements. This habit went on even after his father's death through his elder brothers. He used to make good contacts and relations through those gatherings.

At secondary school and university he adopted the main trend of many educated Muslims at that time, Muslim Brotherhood. There was a collection of Muslim scholars in Jeddah and Mecca at that period. There was nothing extraordinary in his personality and that trend was rather very non-confrontational. Interestingly, the 1980 raid in the Grand Mosque in Mecca was not appealing to him, neither the theology or that group. He had two distinguished teachers in Islamic studies, which was a compulsory subject in the university. First was Abdullah Azzam who became later as one of the big names in Afghanistan and the second was Mohammed Quttub, a famous Islamic writer and philosopher.

AFGHANISTAN. THE FIRST ENCOUNTER

The first encounter with Afghanistan was as early as the first two weeks of Soviet invasion. He went to Pakistan and was taken by his hosts Jamaat Islami from Karachi to Peshawar to see the refugees and meet some leaders. Some of those leaders like Rabbani and Sayyaf were common faces to him because he met them during Hajj gatherings. That trip which was [a] secret trip lasted for almost a month and was an exploratory rather

than action trip. He went back to the kingdom and started lobbying with his brothers, relatives and friends at the school to support the mujahedeen. He succeeded in collecting huge amount of money and material as donations to jihad. He made another trip to take this material. He took with him few Pakistanis and Afghanis who were working in bin Laden company for more than ten years. Again, he did not stay more than a month. The trip was to Pakistan and the border only and was not to Afghanistan. He went on collecting money and going in short trips once or twice a year until 1982.

INSIDE AFGHANISTAN

In 1982 he decided to go inside Afghanistan. He brought with him plenty of the construction machinery and put them at the disposal of the mujahedeen. He started spending more and more time in Afghanistan occasionally joining actual battles but not in an organized manner. His presence was encouraging to more Saudis to come but the numbers were still small at that period.

THE GUESTHOUSE

In 1984 he had one further step in strengthening his presence in Afghanistan by establishing the guesthouse in Peshawar (Baitul'ansar). That house was supposed to be the first station of Arab mujahedeen when they come to Afghanistan before going to the front or start training. At that period Osama did not have his own command or training camps. He used to send the newcomers to one of the Afghan factions. The guesthouse establishment was coinciding with the formation of Jihad Service Bureau by Abdullah Azzam in Peshawar. The Bureau was very active in terms of media, publications and charity work. The Bureau publications were important in attracting more Saudis and Arabs to Afghanistan.

THE CAMPS

In 1986 Osama decided to have his own camps inside Afghanistan and within two years he built more than six camps. Some were mobilized more than once. He decided to have his own front and to run his own battles with his own command. Among the Arab fighters he had, there were senior

Arab ex-military men from Syria and Egypt with good military experience. The story of the guesthouse and the camps was very attractive for more Arab mujahedeen to come and there was a significant surge in their numbers at that period.

In addition to many exchanges of fire and small operations, the first major battle he had face to face with the Soviet army with pure Arab personnel was the battle of Jaji in the province of Baktia 200 kilometers away from Khost. From then until 1989 he had more than five major battles with hundreds of small operations and exchanges of fire. During the period 1984-1989 he was staying more in Afghanistan than Saudi Arabia. He would spend a total of eight months a year or more in Afghanistan.

AL-QA'EDAH

In 1988 he noticed that he was backward in his documentation and was not able to give answers to some families asking about their loved ones gone missing in Afghanistan. He decided to make the matter much more organized and arranged for proper documentation. He made a tracking record of the visitors, be they mujahedeen or charity or simple visitors. Their movement between the guesthouse and the camps had to be recorded as well as their first arrival and final departure. The whole complex was then termed Al-Qa'edah which is an Arabic word meaning "The Base." Al-Qa'edah was very much public knowledge. It was funny to see some people triumphing because they discovered it!

BACK TO THE KINGDOM

Late 1989 after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, he went to the kingdom in an ordinary trip. There he was banned from travel and was trapped in the kingdom. The Soviet withdrawal might have been a factor but the main reason for the travel ban were his intentions to start a new "front" of jihad in South Yemen. In addition, he embarrassed the regime by lectures and speeches warning of impending invasion by Saddam. At that time the regime was at very good terms with Saddam. He was instructed officially to keep low profile and not to give public talks. Despite the travel ban he was not hostile to regime at this stage. Indeed he presented a written advice in the form of a detailed, personal, private and confidential letter to the king few weeks before the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait.

AFTER THE IRAQI INVASION

He reacted swiftly to Iraqi invasion and saw it fulfilling his prophecy. He immediately forwarded another letter to the king suggesting in detail how to protect the country from potentially advancing Iraqi forces. In addition to many military tactics suggested, he volunteered to bring all the Arab mujahedeen to defend the kingdom. That letter was presented in the first few days of the incident, and the regime response was of consideration! While he was expecting some call to mobilize his men and equipment he heard the news which transferred his life completely. The Americans are coming. He always describes that moment as shocking moment. He felt depressed and thought that maneuvers had to change. Instead of writing to the king or approaching other members of the royal family, he started lobbying through religious scholars and Muslim activists. He succeeded in extracting a fatwah from one of the senior scholars that training and readiness is a religious duty. He immediately circulated that fatwah and convinced people to have their training in Afghanistan. It was estimated that 4000 went to Afghanistan in response to the fatwah. The regime was not happy with his activities so they limited his movement to Jeddah only. He was summoned for questioning twice for some of his speeches and activities and was given warnings. To intimidate him, the regime raided his farm in the suburb of Jeddah by the National Guard. He was not there during the raid and was very angry when told. He wrote a letter of protest to Prince Abdullah. Abdullah apologized and claimed he is not aware and promised to punish who ever were responsible.

FLEEING THE KINGDOM

Osama was fed up with this almost house arrest situation and did not imagine himself able to stay in the country with the American forces around. One of his brothers was very close to King Fahad and also close to Prince Ahmed, deputy minister of interior. He convinced his brother that he needed to leave the country to sort out some business matters in Pakistan and come back. There was a difficult obstacle, the stubborn Prince Nayef, minister of interior. His brother waited until Nayef went in a trip outside the kingdom and extracted lifting the ban from prince Ahmed. When he arrived in Pakistan around April 1991 he sent a letter to his brother telling him that he is not coming back and apologized for letting him down with the royal family.

IN AFGHANISTAN AGAIN

After his arrival to Pakistan he went straight to Afghanistan because he knew the Pakistani intelligence would hand him back to the Saudis. There, he attended the collapse of the communist regime and the consequent dispute between the Afghan parties. He spent great effort to arbitrate between them but with no success. He ordered his followers to avoid any involvement in the conflict and told them it was a sin to side with any faction. During his stay the Saudis tried more than once to kidnap or kill him in collaboration with the Pakistani intelligence. His friends in the Saudi and Pakistani establishments would always leak the plan and make him ready for it. After his failure in sorting the Afghani dispute, he decided to leave Afghanistan. The only alternative country he had was Sudan. He left Afghanistan disguised in private jet only few months after his arrival. That was late 1991.

IN SUDAN

His choice of Sudan had nothing to do with jihad or "terrorism." He was attracted to Sudan because of what was at that time an Islamic banner raised by the new regime in Sudan. He wanted to have good refuge as well as help the government in its construction projects. There was no intention from his side or from the Sudanese regime to have any military activity in Sudan. Indeed the Sudanese government refused even sending some of his followers to the front in the south. He was treated in Sudan as a special guest who wanted to help Sudan when everybody was turning away. In Sudan he mobilized a lot of construction equipment and enrolled himself in busy construction projects. He spent good effort in convincing Saudi businessmen to invest in Sudan and had reasonable success. Many of his brothers and Jeddah merchants had and still have investment in real estate, farming and agricultural industry. In Sudan he had again escaped an assassination attempt which turned out later to be the plan of Saudi intelligence.

SOMALIA AND YEMEN

During his stay in Sudan anti-American incidents happened in Somalia and South Yemen. Neither of the two incidents was performed by his group in the proper sense of chain of command. Both were performed by people

who had training in Afghanistan and had enough anti-American drive. He might have given some sanctioning to the operations but one thing was certain, the Sudanese were completely unaware of either.

SAUDIS GO ANTI-BIN LADEN

Between his arrival to Sudan and early 1994 he was not regarded publicly as Saudi opposition and Saudi citizens were visiting him without too much precautions. Only the well-informed people would know that he was classified as enemy to the Saudi regime. His assets were frozen sometime between 1992 and 1994 but that was not published. The Saudis decided to announce their hostility early 1994 when they publicized withdrawing his citizenship.

BIN LADEN GOES ANTI-SAUDI

After long silence and tolerance, bin Laden replied by issuing a communiqué condemning the Saudi decision and saying that he does not need the "Saudi" reference to identify himself and it is not up to Al-Saud to admit or expel people from Arabian Peninsula. He then formed together with activists and scholars from the kingdom a group called "Advice and Reform Committee" (ARC). The ARC was, according to its communiqués and published agenda, a purely political group. The ARC published around 17 communiqués which might have contained harsh criticism of the Saudi regime and plenty of religious rhetoric but never contained reference for violence or incitement of violence.

RIYADH BOMBING

The car bomb in spring 1995 in Riyadh was the first major anti-American action in the kingdom. Bin Laden never claimed responsibility, but the Saudi government tried to link the incident to bin Laden by showing video confessions of four "Arab Afghans" involved in the bombing.

OUT OF SUDAN

Sudan was exposed to huge international pressure for hosting bin Laden

and his followers, and bin Laden felt that he is becoming an embarrassment to the Sudanese. Early in 1996 he started making contacts with his old friends in Afghanistan to prepare for his reception. He fled Sudan in a very well planned trip with many of his followers to go straight to Jalalabad in Eastern Afghanistan.

IN AFGHANISTAN THIRD TIME

When he arrived there, the situation in Afghanistan was very unsettled between the many factions, but he had very good relations with all factions and all would protect him. The area he arrived to was under control of Yunis Khalis, a very influential warlord who later on joined Taliban.

THE KHOBAR BOMBING

June 1996, after his arrival in Afghanistan was the Khobar bombing. Nobody claimed responsibility, but sources from inside the Saudi ministry of interior confirmed involvement of Arab Afghans, with possible link to bin Laden. The Saudi government wanted to frame Shi'a, at the beginning but Americans were very suspicious of the Saudi story. Bin Laden himself never claimed responsibility but gave many hints that he might have been involved. The Saudi government has acknowledged recently that bin Laden's men were behind the bombing.